

U.S. Post Office  
1201 11th Avenue  
Intown Neighborhood  
Altoona  
Blair County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5505

HABS  
PA.  
7-ALTO.  
114 -

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

UNITED STATES POST OFFICE

HABS No. PA-5505

HABS  
PA,  
7-ALTO,  
114-

Location: 1201 11th Ave. (southwest side of 11th Avenue between 12th and 13th streets), Altoona, Blair County, Pa.

Present Owner: Federal government.

Present Use: U.S. post office and offices of several government agencies.

Significance: The U.S. post office, designed by the local architectural firm of Royer and Anglemyer in 1931, is the city's outstanding example of the Art Deco style. The monumental Neoclassical building, of Indiana limestone with a granite foundation, is richly embellished with linear, low-relief, ornamentation. The interior of the post office, which displays multi-colored marble wainscoting and two murals by W.P.A. artist Lorin Thompson, is in virtually unaltered condition. The building was the second federal post office to be erected in Altoona in the twentieth century, and its construction symbolizes the city's unprecedented growth during the 1910s and 1920s.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1931-33. Excavation began in November 1931. The limestone cornerstone was laid May 4, 1932, without ceremony, in keeping with federal policy; the building opened to the public March 1, 1933.
2. Architect: Royer and Anglemyer of Altoona were the project's architects, receiving \$19,256 for their work. Associated with them in the planning and design of the post office were the firm of Hornbostel and Wood of Pittsburgh; Frederic J. Shollar of Altoona; and F. G. Rutan, also of Altoona, who had been the Chicago-based construction engineer for Penn Alto Hotel. James A. Whetmore of Washington, D.C., served as acting supervisory architect. Whetmore, a lawyer by training, was Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury Department from 1915 to 1933. ("Local Firm Will Plan Postoffice." Altoona Mirror [February 5, 1931])

The architectural firm of Royer and Anglemyer was formed in 1928, with offices in the Commerce Building. Born in York, Pa., in 1895, David A. Royer got his start in Altoona in 1921, working for Julian Millard. He established his own practice in 1924, when Millard left for Harrisburg to assume the post of State Supervising Architect. Ronald C. Anglemyer was born in Leetonia, Ohio, in 1896. Like Royer, he earned his B.S. in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania in 1921. After associating with the architectural firms of Wittman and Royer of York, and Lawry and Green of Harrisburg, Anglemyer moved to Altoona in 1928, establishing a partnership with Royer. Their firm was listed in city directories until the mid 1930s, when both men left Altoona for opportunities elsewhere. Royer apparently took a position as a state engineer in Harrisburg in 1935. (Davis, II:70-72; "Tendered Farewell," Altoona Mirror, [July 6, 1935])

3. Original and subsequent owners: In 1930, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company sold the site to the federal government for \$350,000. The property included the Logan House hotel, erected in 1855, and the PRR's passenger station and ticket office. All of these buildings were razed to make way for the new post office.

UNITED STATES POST OFFICE  
HABS No. PA-5505 (Page 2)

4. Builders, contractors, and suppliers:

- a. Contractor: R. B. McDaniel of New Brighton, Pennsylvania, won the building contract. William A. Miller, a construction engineer, supervised the construction. Two additional firms won bids to demolish portions of the Logan House complex; on June 23, 1931, G. H. Shartzer received a contract to raze the hotel itself, and A. J. Kerns got a contract to clear the rest of the site.

b. Sub-contractors:

Structural steel: McClintock-Marshall Co., Pittsburgh, Pa.

Reinforced steel: Kalman Co.

Steel and aluminum sash: Detroit Steel Products.

Ornamental metal and bronze work, interior and exterior: Art Metal Construction Co., Jamestown, N.Y.

Elevators: American Elevator and Machine Co., Louisville, Ky., received a contract for \$23,489.

Stone work: N.V. Frasca.

Indiana limestone: Supplied by Altoona Clay Products.

Electrical equipment: Installed by Bottorf Electric.

Limestone for concrete work: Supplied by Eldorado Stone Co.

Plumbing and heating: Trout and Taughenbaugh, Altoona.

Interior painting: Adams Paint Co., Chicago, was awarded a contract for \$2,300.

(Compiled from numerous articles in the U.S. Post Office clippings files, Altoona Mirror library)

5. Original plans and construction: The three-story building was designed to house post office operations in the basement and on the first floor. The mezzanine and second floors were originally occupied by U.S. Army and Navy recruiting stations, the offices of the post office inspector, Internal Revenue Service, and Blair County reserves. The parcel post department also had its work space on the second floor. The total cost of construction was \$672,600, including the \$350,000 for the site.

6. Alterations and additions: In 1937, two murals depicting scenes from Altoona's history were added to the interior, on either end of the central lobby. Financed by the Works Project Administration, the murals were executed by Lorin Thompson of Wilkinson, Pa.

In 1956, the giant, cast-aluminum eagles mounted over both of the 11th Avenue entrances were removed after their fastenings became loose. In 1959, the cast-aluminum cresting which ran around the entire roof was removed after a 15' section blew to the ground near the loading platform in the rear of the building.

B. Historical Context:

The first post office in the Altoona area was established in Collinsville, in 1817. A branch post office was set up in Altoona in 1850, just one year after the town was laid out; it was housed in either a private residence or business, depending upon the whim of each new postmaster. In 1852, the post office was located in Thomas Elway's residence, at the corner of 12th Avenue and 14th Street; in 1853, it moved to Jerry Davis's butcher shop on 11th Avenue; and in 1856, it moved again to offices in the old Masonic Temple Building. From about 1875 until 1902, the post office occupied the first floor of the Odd Fellows Building on 12th Street between 10th and 11th avenues, a site convenient to

both the business district and rail transportation.<sup>1</sup>

The first U.S. post office, a two-story limestone and terra cotta structure, was erected in 1901-02. The building stood on the corner of 11th Street and Chestnut Avenue, opposite the Casanave Building. By the 1920s, however, the facility was too small to handle both the increased demands of parcel post, which was established in 1913, and the needs of the rapidly expanding city. The statistics are astonishing: Altoona's postal delivery area increased from three square miles in 1910 to almost nine square miles in 1932. By the late 1920s, moreover, gross postal receipts were up 609 percent from 1902 levels. An annex was constructed in 1925 to help with the increased volume of mail.<sup>2</sup>

The first U.S. post office remained in use until March 1, 1933, when the new building on 11th Avenue opened. It was demolished in 1946 to make way for a gasoline station, despite the best efforts of preservationists to convert the building into a public library.<sup>3</sup>

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Three-story columns and pilasters add verticality to the post office's low, rectangular massing. Low-relief, stylized floral and geometric ornamentation embellishes the entire building.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The building measures 170' on 11th Avenue (nine bays) x 100' on 12th Street (five bays) x 52' high.
2. Foundations: Granite.
3. Walls: Smooth limestone on the street facades. The northeast (rear) and southeast (parking lot) facades have yellow brick walls laid in Flemish bond. There are eight engaged, fluted Doric columns, each three stories tall, on the 11th Avenue facade. The five bays on the 12th Street facade are separated by six three-story pilasters.
4. Structural systems, framing: The building has a steel and reinforced-concrete frame. Additional reinforcements were provided by two steel girders, one 74' long and 8' high, weighing 25 tons, and a second weighing 14 tons, which were placed at the rear base of the building to support the loading platform.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The two main entrances are located in the second and eighth bays of

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<sup>1</sup>"Early History of Post Office Given." Altoona Mirror (February 24, 1923).

<sup>2</sup>The statistics are cited in "New Post Office Building," typescript, n.d., Altoona Mirror library clippings file.

<sup>3</sup>For more information on the history of the first U.S. post office, see Altoona Mirror: "Early History of Post Office Given," (February 24, 1923); "Plan to Sell Old Federal Building," (March 16, 1937); and "Dynamite Has Little Effect on Postoffice," (August 14, 1946).

UNITED STATES POST OFFICE  
HABS No. PA-5505 (Page 4)

the 11th Avenue facade. They each have two-story, Neoclassical surrounds; large, rectangular transoms; and new glass and aluminum double doors.

- b. Windows: There are paired, two-part windows within each structural bay. The spandrels between the second- and third-floor windows have rectangular panels decorated with low-relief, geometric designs. The second and fourth windows on the southeast facade are bricked in.

6. Roof:

- a. Shape: Flat roof.
- b. Cornice: The frieze below the modillioned cornice reads, "UNITED STATES POST OFFICE."

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First: The public space consists of a longitudinal lobby, giving access to the counters and mailboxes on the left. The offices of the postmaster are located off the lobby on the 12th Street side.
- b. Mezzanine: Several offices open off of short, transverse corridors.
- c. Second: Not accessible.

2. Stairways: Two stairways, both adjacent to the main entrances, rise to the mezzanine level. The handrails are brass; the treads, marble. A public elevator is located to the left of the stairway closest to the 12th Street.

3. Flooring: Various floor coverings are used throughout the building. The inner vestibule has multi-colored terrazzo. The main lobby has multi-colored terrazzo, with a black marble border. The work rooms have asphalt floors; the first-floor offices, hardwood.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster on lath. The inner vestibules have low-relief, stylized decoration around the door openings and on the ceiling. The central lobby has marble baseboards and marble and travertine walls; its vaulted ceiling is coffered. A floral medallion is centered in each of the hexagonal coffers. A denticulated plaster cornice and a band of trim in a Greek key motif run around the perimeter of the central lobby.

5. Doorways and doors: The doorways have gray marble bolection moldings. Typical interior doors in the public lobby have two rectangular panels.

6. Murals: The two rectangular murals, installed in 1937, depict scenes of national building efforts from the early days of Altoona. Their palette is subdued; blues, greens, browns, and black predominate. In 1939, the Altoona Mirror published some of Lorin Thompson's thoughts on his work:

The smaller mural [the one closest to 12th Street] depicts the coming of railroad transportation and the displacement of the older modes of travel which are retreating from the scene. Stage coaches, Conestoga wagons, and canal boats are some of the earlier means

UNITED STATES POST OFFICE  
HABS No. PA-5505 (Page 5)

of travel that are shown in the mural. The larger mural [closest to the post office parking lot] depicts the factors contributing to the growth of Altoona, the home, the church, the school, the industry . . . In the background are simplified representations of some of the more imposing and characteristic present-day Altoona buildings. (Peggy Gonter and Jeanne Stoke, "Senior High Art Students Enjoy Local Paintings," Altoona Mirror, [December 12, 1939])

7. Original furnishings: Three original, cast-metal writing tables with glass tops are still in use in the central lobby.

D. Site: The U.S. post office stands on 11th Avenue between 11th and 13th streets, facing northwest.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: None located.
- B. Early view: Photograph by McDowell Photo Studio, 1934, looking southwest from 12th Street. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary sources:

Altoona Mirror:

"Dynamite Has Little Effect on Postoffice," (August 14, 1946), described the demolition of the first federal post office. The caption accompanying a photograph of the building likened the partially demolished structure to the bombed-out remains of buildings in northern European cities.

"Early History of Post Office Given," (February 24, 1923).

"Local Firm Will Plan New Post Office," (February 5, 1931).

"Major Repair Program Set at Post Office," (September 1, 1956).

"Old Fence Removed from Postoffice Roof," (December 12, 1956).

"Plan to Sell Old Federal Building," (March 16, 1937).

"Postoffice 'Grounds' Cast-Aluminum Eagles," (January 18, 1956).

"Proposed New Altoona Postoffice," (August 22, 1931), includes an architects' rendering of the front facade.

"Tendered Farewell," (July 6, 1935).

"New Post Office Building," typescript, n.d., contains a physical description of the completed building. Altoona Mirror library clippings file.

UNITED STATES POST OFFICE  
HABS No. PA-5505 (Page 6)

2. Secondary sources:

Blair County's Postal History. Altoona: Blair County Historical Society, 1947. Provides a useful overview of the post office in Altoona.

Davis, Tarring S., ed. A History of Blair County. Volume II. Harrisburg: National Historical Association, 1931. Contains biographical sketches of David A. Royer and Ronald C. Anglemeyer.

Harris Emily. "Local Post Office Has Long History," Altoona Mirror (June 12, 1934).

U.S. Postal Service. "Historic, Architectural, and Archeological Significance Survey," 1983, makes the astonishing statement that "the building has no architectural or historical significance and is not located in an historically significant environment."

The survey goes on to recommend that the post office not be nominated to the National Register.

Wolf, George A, ed. Blair County's First Hundred Years: 1846-1946. Altoona: The Mirror Press, 1945.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the downtown (HABS No. PA-5789) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the direction of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian and Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach.